

## A SECOND MARRIAGE.

AMELIA PORTER sat by her great open fireplace, where the round, consequential black kettle hung from the crane and breathed out a steamy cloud to be at once licked up and absorbed by the heat from a snatching flame below. It was exactly a year and a day since her husband's death, and she had packed herself away in his own corner of the settle, her hands clasped across her knees, and her red-brown eyes brooding on the nearer embers. She was not definitely speculating on her future, nor had she any heart for retracing the dull and gentle past. She had simply relaxed hold on her mind ; and so, escaping her, it had gone wandering off into shadowy prophecies of the immediate years. For, as Amelia had been telling herself for the last three months, since she had begun to outgrow the habit of a dual life, she was not old. Whenever she looked in the glass, she could not help noting how free from wrinkles her swarthy face had been kept, and that the line of her mouth was still scarlet over white, even teeth. Her crisp black hair, curling in those tight fine rolls which a bashful admirer had once commended as "full of little jerks," showed not a trace of gray. All this evidence of her senses read her a fair tale of the possibilities of the morrow ; and without once saying, "I will take up a new life," she did tacitly acknowledge that life was not over.

It was a "snapping cold" night of early spring, so misplaced as to bring with it a certain dramatic excitement. The roads were frozen hard, and shone like silver in the ruts. All day sleds had gone creaking past, set to that fine groaning which belongs to the music of the year. The drivers' breath ascended in steam, the while they stamped down the probability of freezing, and yelled to Buck and Broad until that inner fervor

raised them one degree in warmth. The smoking cattle held their noses low and swayed beneath the yoke.

Amelia, shut snugly in her winter-tight house, had felt the power of the day without sharing its discomforts ; and her eyes deepened and burned with a sense of the movement and warmth of living. To-night, under the spell of some vague expectancy, she had sat still for a long time, her sewing laid aside and her room scrupulously in order. She was waiting for what was not to be acknowledged even to her own intimate self. But as the clock struck nine she roused herself, and shook off her mood in impatience and a disappointment which she would not own. She looked about the room, as she often had of late, and began to enumerate its possibilities in case she should desire to have it changed. Amelia never went so far as to say that change should be ; she only felt that she had still a right to speculate upon it, as she had done for many years, as a form of harmless enjoyment. While every other house in the neighborhood had gone from the consistently good to the prosperously bad in the matter of refurnishing, John Porter had kept his precisely as his grandfather had left it to him. Amelia had never once complained ; she had observed toward her husband an unfailing deference, due, she felt, to his twenty years' seniority ; perhaps, also, it stood in her own mind as the only amends she could offer him for having married him without love. It was her father who made the match ; and Amelia had succumbed, not through the obedience claimed by parents of an elder day, but from hot jealousy and the pique inevitably born of it. Laurie Morse had kept the singing-school that winter. He had loved Amelia ; he had bound himself to her by all the most holy vows sworn

from aforetime, and then in some wanton exhibit of power — gone home with another girl. And for Amelia's responsive throb of feminine anger she had spent fifteen years of sober country living with a man who had wrapped her about with the quiet tenderness of a strong nature, but who was not of her own generation either in mind or in habit; and Laurie had kept a music-store in Saltash, seven miles away, and remained unmarried.

Now Amelia looked about the room, and mentally displaced the furniture, as she had done so many times while she and her husband sat there together. The settle could be taken to the attic. She had not the heart to carry out one secret resolve indulged in moments of impatient bitterness, — to split it up for firewood. But it could at least be exiled. She would have a good cook-stove, and the great fireplace should be walled up. The tin kitchen, sitting now beside the hearth in shining quaintness, should also go into the attic. The old clock — But at that instant the clash of bells shivered the frosty air, and Amelia threw her vain imaginings aside like a garment, and sprang to her feet. She clasped her hands in a spontaneous gesture of rapt attention; and when the sound paused at her gate, with one or two sweet, lingering clangles, "I knew it!" she said aloud. Yet she did not go to the window to look into the moonlit night. Standing there in the middle of the room, she awaited the knock which was not long in coming. It was imperative, insistent. Amelia, who had a spirit responsive to the dramatic exigencies of life, felt a little flush spring into her face, so hot that, on the way to the door, she involuntarily put her hand to her cheek and held it there. The door came open grumblingly. It sagged upon the hinges, but, well used to its vagaries, she overcame it with a regardless haste.

"Come in," she said at once to the man on the step. "It's cold. Oh, come in!"

He stepped inside the entry, removing his fur cap, and disclosing a youthful

face charged with that radiance which made him, at thirty-five, almost the counterpart of his former self. It may have come only from the combination of curly brown hair, blue eyes, and an aspiring lift of the chin, but it always seemed to mean a great deal more. In the kitchen he threw off his heavy coat, while Amelia, bright-eyed and breathing quickly, stood by, quite silent. Then he looked at her.

"You expected me, did n't you?" he asked.

A warmer color surged into her cheeks. "I did n't know," she said perversely.

"I guess you did. It's one day over a year. You knew I'd wait a year."

"It ain't a year over the services," said Amelia, trying to keep the note of vital expectancy out of her voice. "It won't be that till Friday."

"Well, Saturday I'll come again." He went over to the fire and stretched out his hands to the blaze. "Come here," he said imperatively, "while I talk to you."

Amelia stepped forward obediently, like a good little child. The old fascination was still as dominant as at its birth, sixteen years ago. She realized, with a strong, splendid sense of the eternity of things, that always, even while it would have been treason to recognize it, she had known how ready it was to rise and live again. All through her married years she had sternly drugged it and kept it sleeping. Now it had a right to breathe, and she gloried in it.

"I said to myself I would n't come to-day," went on Laurie, without looking at her. A new and excited note had come into his voice, responsive to her own. He gazed down at the fire, musing the while he spoke. "Then I found I could n't help it. That's why I'm so late. I stayed in the shop till seven, and some fellows come in and wanted me to play. I took up the fiddle, and begun. But I had n't more 'n drew a note before I laid it down and put for the door.

'Dick, you keep shop,' says I. And I harnessed up, and drove like the devil.'

Amelia felt warm with life and hope; she was taking up her youth just where the story ended.

"You ain't stopped swearin' yet!" she said, with a little excited laugh. Then, from an undercurrent of exhilaration, it occurred to her that she had never laughed so in all these years.

"Well," said Laurie abruptly, turning upon her, "how am I goin' to start out? Shall we hark back to old scores? I know what come between us. So do you. Have we got to talk it out, or can we begin now?"

"Begin now," replied Amelia faintly. Her breath choked her. He stretched out his arms to her in sudden passion. His hands touched her sleeves, and, with an answering rapidity of motion, she drew back. She shrank within herself, and her face gathered a look of fright. "No! no! no!" she cried strenuously.

His arms fell at his sides, and he looked at her in amazement.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

Amelia had retreated, until she stood now with one hand on the table. She could not look at him, and when she answered her voice shook.

"There's nothin' the matter," she said. "Only you must n't — yet."

A shade of relief passed over his face, and he smiled.

"There, there!" he said, "never you mind. I understand. But if I come over the last of the week, I guess it will be different. Won't it be different, Milly?"

"Yes," she owned, with a little sob in her throat, "it will be different."

Thrown out of his niche of easy friendliness with circumstance, he stood there in irritated consciousness that here was some subtle barrier which he had not foreseen. Ever since John Porter's death, there had been strengthening in him a joyous sense that Milly's life and his own must have been running parallel

all this time, and that it needed only a little widening of channels to make them join. His was no crass certainty of finding her ready to drop into his hand; it was rather a childlike, warm-hearted faith in the permanence of her affection for him, and perhaps, too, a shrewd estimate of his own lingering youth compared with John Porter's furrowed face and his fifty-five years. But now, with this new whiffling of the wind, he could only stand rebuffed and recognize his own perplexity.

"You do care, don't you, Milly?" he asked, with a boy's frank ardor. "You want me to come again?"

All her own delight in youth and the warm naturalness of life had rushed back upon her.

"Yes," she answered eagerly. "I'll tell you the truth. I always did tell you the truth. I do want you to come."

"But you don't want me to-night!" He lifted his brows, pursing his lips whimsically; and Amelia laughed.

"No," said she, with a little defiant movement of her own crisp head, "I don't know as I do want you to-night!"

Laurie shook himself into his coat. "Well," said he, on his way to the door, "I'll be round Saturday, whether or no. And Milly," he added significantly, his hand on the latch, "you've got to like me then!"

Amelia laughed. "I guess there won't be no trouble!" she called after him daringly.

She stood there in the biting wind, while he uncovered the horse and drove away. Then she went shaking back to her fire; but it was not altogether from cold. The sense of the consistency of love and youth, the fine justice with which nature was paying an old debt, had raised her to a stature above her own. She stood there under the mantel, and held by it while she trembled. For the first time, her husband had gone utterly out of her life. It was as though he had not been.

"Saturday!" she said to herself. "Saturday! Three days till then!"

Next morning the spring asserted itself; there came a whiff of wind from the south and a feeling of thaw. The sled-runners began to cut through to the frozen ground, and about the tree-trunks, where thin crusts of ice were sparkling, came a faint musical sound of trickling drops. The sun was regnant, and little brown birds flew cheerily over the snow and talked of nests.

Amelia finished her housework by nine o'clock, and then sat down in her low rocker by the south window, sewing in thrifty haste. The sun fell hotly through the panes, and when she looked up the glare met her eyes. She seemed to be sitting in a golden shower, and she liked it. No sunlight ever made her blink or screw her face into wrinkles. She threw in it like a rose-tree. At ten o'clock, one of the slow-moving sleds out that day in premonition of a "spell o' weather" swung laboriously into her yard and ground its way up to the side-door. The sled was empty save for a rocking-chair where sat an enormous woman enveloped in shawls, her broad face surrounded by a pumpkin hood. Her dark brown front came low over her forehead, and she wore spectacles with wide bows, which gave her an added expression of benevolence. She waved a mittenend hand to Amelia when their eyes met, and her heavy face broke up into smiles.

"Here I be!" she called in a thick, gurgling voice, as Amelia hastened out, her apron thrown over her head. "Did n't expect me, did ye? Nobody looks for an old rheumatic creatur'. She's more out o' the runnin' 'n a last year's bird's-nest."

"Why, aunt Ann!" cried Amelia in unmistakable joy. "I'm tickled to death to see you. Here, Amos, I'll help get her out."

The driver, a short thick-set man of neutral ashy tints and a sprinkling of hair and beard, trudged round the oxen

and drew the rocking-chair forward without a word. He never once looked in Amelia's direction, and she seemed not to expect it; but he had scarcely laid hold of the chair when aunt Ann broke forth: —

"Now, Amos, ain't you goin' to take no notice of 'Melia, no more 'n if she wa'n't here? She ain't a bump on a log, nor you a born fool."

Amos at once relinquished his sway over the chair, and stood looking abstractedly at the oxen, who, with their heads low, had already fallen into that species of day-dream whereby they compensate themselves for human tyranny. They were waiting for Amos, and Amos, in obedience to some inward resolve, waited for commotion to cease.

"If ever I was ashamed, I be now!" continued aunt Ann, still with an expression of settled good nature, and in a voice all jollity though raised conscientiously to a scolding pitch. "To think I should bring such a creatur' into the world, an' set by to see him treat his own relations like the dirt under his feet!"

Amelia laughed. She was exhilarated by the prospect of company, and this domestic whirlpool had amused her from of old.

"Law, aunt Ann," she said, "you let Amos alone. He and I are old cronies. We understand one another. Here, Amos, catch hold! We shall all get our deaths out here, if we don't do nothin' but stand still and squabble."

The immovable Amos had only been awaiting his cue. He lifted the laden chair with perfect ease to one of the piazza steps, and then to another; when it had reached the topmost level, he dragged it over the sill into the kitchen, and, leaving his mother sitting in colossal triumph by the fire, turned about and took his silent way to the outer world.

"Amos," called aunt Ann, "do you mean to say you're goin' to walk out o' this house without speakin' a civil word to anybody? Do you mean to say that?"

"I don't mean to say nothin'," confided Amos to his worsted muffler, as he took up his goad and began backing the oxen round.

Undisturbed and not at all daunted by a reply for which she had not even listened, aunt Ann raised her voice in cheerful response: "Well, you be along 'tween three an' four, an' you'll find me ready."

"Mercy, aunt Ann!" said Amelia, beginning to unwind the visitor's wraps, "what makes you keep houndin' Amos that way? If he has n't spoke for thirty-five years, it ain't likely he's goin' to begin now."

Aunt Ann was looking about her with an expression of beaming delight in unfamiliar surroundings. She laughed a rich, unctuous laugh, and stretched her hands to the blaze.

"Law," she said contentedly, "of course it ain't goin' to do no good. Who ever thought 't would? But I've been at that boy all these years to make him like other folks, an' I ain't goin' to stop now. He never shall say his own mother did n't know her duty towards him. Well, 'Melia, you *air* kind o' snug here, arter all! Here, you hand me my bag, an' I'll knit a stitch. I ain't a mite cold."

Amelia was bustling about the fire, her mind full of the possibilities of a company dinner.

"How's your limbs?" she asked, while aunt Ann drew out a long stocking and began to knit with an amazing rapidity of which her fat fingers gave no promise.

"Well, I ain't allowed to forgit 'em very often," she replied comfortably. "Rheumatiz is my cross, an' I've got to bear it. Sometimes I wish 't had gone into my hands ruther 'n my feet, an' I could ha' got round. But there! if 't ain't one thing, it's another. Mis' Eben Smith's got eight young ones down with the whoopin'-cough. Amos dragged me over there yesterday; an' when I heerd 'em tryin' to see which could bark the

loudest, I says, 'Give me the peace o' Jerusalem in my own house, even if I don't stir a step for the next five year no more 'n I have for the last.' I dunno what 't would be if I had n't a darter. I've been greatly blessed."

The talk went on in pleasant ripples, while Amelia moved back and forth from pantry to table. She brought out the mixing-board, and began to put her bread in the pans, while the tin kitchen stood in readiness by the hearth. The sunshine flooded all the room, and lay insolently on the paling fire; the Maltese cat sat in the broadest shaft of all, and, having lunched from her full saucer in the corner, made her second toilet for the day.

"'Melia," said aunt Ann suddenly, looking down over her glasses at the tin kitchen, "ain't it a real cross to bake in that thing?"

"I always had it in mind to buy me a range," answered Amelia reservedly, "but somehow we never got to it."

"That's the only thing I ever had ag'inst John. He was as grand a man as ever was, but he did set everything by such truck. Don't turn out the old things, I say, no more 'n the old folks; but when it comes to makin' a woman stan' quiddlin' round doin' work back side foremost, that beats me."

"He'd have got me a stove in a minute," burst forth Amelia in haste, "only he never knew I wanted it!"

"More fool you not to ha' said so!" commented aunt Ann, unwinding her ball. "Well, I s'pose he would. John wa'n't like the common run o' men. Great strong creatur' he was, but there was suthin' about him as soft as a woman. His mother used to say his eyes 'd fill full o' tears when he broke up a settin' hen. He was a good husband to you,—a good provider an' a good friend."

Amelia was putting down her bread for its last rising, and her face flushed.

"Yes," she said gently, "he *was* good."

"But there!" continued aunt Ann,

dismissing all lighter considerations, "I dunno's that's any reason why you should bake in a tin kitchen, nor why you should need to heat up the brick oven every week, when 't was only done to please him, an' he ain't here to know. Now, 'Melia, le's see what you could do. When you got the range in, 't would alter this kitchen all over. Why don't you tear down that old-fashioned mantelpiece in the fore-room ? "

"I could have a marble one," responded Amelia in a low voice. She had taken her sewing again, and she bent her head over it as if she were ashamed. A flush had risen in her cheeks, and her hand trembled.

"Wide marble! real low down!" confirmed aunt Ann in a tone of triumph. "So fur as that goes, you could have a marble-top table." She laid down her knitting, and looked about her, a spark of excited anticipation in her eyes. All the habits of a lifetime urged her on to arrange and rearrange, in pursuit of domestic perfection. People used to say, in her first married days, that Ann Doby wasted more time in planning conveniences about her house than she ever saved by them "arter she got 'em." In her active years, she was, in local phrase, "a driver." Up and about early and late, she directed and managed until her house seemed to be a humming hive of industry and thrift. Yet there was never anything too urgent in that sway. Her beaming good humor acted as a buffer between her and the doers of her will; and though she might scold, she never rasped and irritated. Nor had she really succumbed in the least to the disease which had practically disabled her. It might confine her to a chair and render her dependent upon the service of others, but over it also was she spiritual victor. She could sit in her kitchen and issue orders; and her daughter, with no initiative genius of her own, had all aunt Ann's love of "springin' to it." She

cherished, besides, a worshipful admiration for her mother; so that she asked no more than to act as the humble hand under that directing head. It was Amos who tacitly rebelled. When a boy in school he virtually gave up talking, and thereafter opened his lips only when some practical exigency was to be filled. But once did he vouchsafe a reason for that eccentricity. It was in his fifteenth year, as aunt Ann remembered well, when the minister had called; and Amos, in response to some remark about his hope of salvation, had looked abstractedly out of the window.

"I'd be ashamed," announced aunt Ann, after the minister had gone,—"Amos, I *would* be ashamed, if I could n't open my head to a minister of the gospel!"

"If one head's open permanent in a house, I guess that fills the bill," said Amos, getting up to seek the woodpile. "I ain't goin' to interfere with nobody else's contract."

His mother looked after him with gaping lips, and for the space of half an hour spoke no word.

To-day she saw before her an alluring field of action; the prospect roused within her energies never incapable of responding to a spur.

"My soul, 'Melia!" she exclaimed, looking about the kitchen with a dominating eye, "how I should like to git hold o' this house! I al'ays did have a hankerin' that way, an' I don't mind tellin' ye. You could change it all round complete."

"It's a good house," said Amelia evasively, taking quick, even stitches, but listening hungrily to the voice of outside temptation. It seemed to confirm all the long-suppressed ambitions of her own heart.

"You're left well on 't," continued aunt Ann, her shrewd blue eyes taking on a speculative look. "I'm glad you sold the stock. A woman never undertakes man's work but she comes out the

little eend o' the horn. The house is enough, if you keep it nice. Now, you've got that money laid away, an' all he left you besides. You could live in the village, if you was a mind to."

A deep flush struck suddenly into Amelia's cheek. She thought of Saltash and Laurie Morse.

"I don't want to live in the village," she said sharply, thus reprimanding her own errant mind. "I like my home."

"Law, yes, of course ye do," replied aunt Ann easily, returning to her knitting. "I was only spec'latin'. The land, 'Melia, what you doin' of? Repairin' an old coat?"

Amelia bent lower over her sewing. "T was his," she answered in a voice almost inaudible. "I put a patch on it last night by lamplight, and when daytime come I found it was purple. So I'm takin' it off, and puttin' on a black one to match the stuff."

"Goin' to give it away?"

"No, I ain't," returned Amelia, again with that sharp, remonstrant note in her voice. "What makes you think I'd do such a thing as that?"

"Law, I did n't mean no harm. You said you was repairin' on 't,—that's all."

Amelia was ashamed of her momentary outbreak. She looked up and smiled sunnily.

"Well, I suppose it is foolish," she owned,—"too foolish to tell. But I've been settin' all his clothes in order to lay 'em aside at last. I kind o' like to do it."

Aunt Ann wagged her head, and ran a knitting-needle up under her cap on a voyage of discovery.

"You think so now," she said wisely, "but you'll see some time it's better by fur to give 'em away while ye can. The time never 'll come when it's any easier. My soul, 'Melia, how I should like to git up into your chambers! It's six year now sence I've seen 'em."

Amelia laid down her work and considered the possibility.

"I don't know how in the world I could h'ist you up there," she remarked, from an evident background of hospitable good will.

"H'ist me up? I guess you could n't! You'd need a tackle an' falls. Amos has had to come to draggin' me round by degrees, an' I don't go off the lower floor. Be them chambers jest the same, 'Melia?"

"Oh yes, they're just the same. Everything is. You know he did n't like changes."

"Blue spread on the west room bed?"

"Yes."

"Spinnin'-wheels out in the shed chamber where his gran'mother Hooper kep' 'em?"

"Yes."

"Say, 'Melia, do you s'pose that little still's up attic he used to have such a royal good time with, makin' essences?"

Amelia's eyes filled suddenly with hot, unmanageable tears.

"Yes," she said; "we used it only two summers ago. I come across it yesterday. Seemed as if I could smell the peppermint I brought in for him to pick over. He was too sick to go out much then."

Aunt Ann had laid down her work again, and was gazing into vistas of rich enjoyment.

"I'll be whipped if I should n't like to see that little still!"

"I'll go up and bring it down after dinner," said Amelia soberly, folding her work and taking off her thimble. "I'd just as soon as not."

All through the dinner hour aunt Ann kept up an inspiring stream of question and reminiscence.

"You be a good cook, 'Melia, an' no mistake," she remarked, breaking her brown hot biscuit. "This your same kind o' bread, made without yeast?"

"Yes," answered Amelia, pouring the tea. "I save a mite over from the last risin'."

Aunt Ann smelled the biscuit critically.

"Well, it makes proper nice bread," she said, "but seems to me that's a terrible shif'less way to go abbut it. However'd you happen to git hold on't? You wa'n't never brought up to 't."

"His mother used to make it so. 'T was no great trouble, and 't would have worried him if I'd changed."

When the lavender-sprigged china had been washed and the hearth swept up, the room fell into its aspect of afternoon repose. The cat, after another serious ablution, sprang up into a chair drawn close to the fireplace, and coiled herself symmetrically on the faded patchwork cushion. Amelia stroked her in passing. She liked to see puss appropriate that chair; her purr from it renewed the message of domestic content.

"Now," said Amelia, "I'll get the still."

"Bring down anything else that's ancient!" called aunt Ann. "We've pretty much got red o' such things over t' our house, but I kind o' like to see 'em."

When Amelia returned, she staggered under a miscellaneous burden: the still, some old swifts for winding yarn, and a pair of wool-cards.

"I don't believe you know so much about cardin' wool as I do," she said in some triumph, regarding the cards with the saddened gaze of one who recalls an occupation never to be resumed. "You see you dropped all such work when new things come in. I kept right on because he wanted me to."

Aunt Ann was abundantly interested and amused.

"Well, now, if ever!" she repeated over and over again. "If this don't carry me back! Seems if I could hear the wheel hummin' an' gramma Balch steppin' back an' forth as stiddy as a clock. It's been a good while sence I've thought o' such old days."

"If it's old days you want" — began Amelia, and she sped upstairs with a new light of resolution in her eyes.

It was a long time before she returned, — so long that aunt Ann exhausted the still, and turned again to her thrifty knitting. Then there came a bumping noise on the stairs, and Amelia's shuffling tread.

"What under the sun be you doin' of?" called her aunt, listening, with her head on one side. "Don't you fall, 'Melia! Whatever 't is, I can't help ye."

But the stairway door yielded to pressure from within: and first a rim of wood appeared, and then Amelia, scarlet and breathless, staggering under a spinning-wheel.

"Forever!" ejaculated aunt Ann, making one futile effort to rise, like some cumbersome fowl whose wings are clipped. "My land alive! you'll break a blood-vessel, an' then where'll ye be?"

Amelia triumphantly drew the wheel to the middle of the floor, and then blew upon her dusty hands and smoothed her tumbled hair. She took off her apron and wiped the wheel with it rather tenderly, as if an ordinary duster would not do.

"There!" she said. "Here's some rolls right here in the bedroom. I carded them myself, but I never expected to spin any more."

She adjusted a roll to the spindle, and, quite forgetting aunt Ann, began stepping back and forth in a rhythmic march of feminine service. The low hum of her spinning filled the air, and she seemed to be wrapped about by an atmosphere of remoteness and memory. Even aunt Ann was impressed by it; and once, beginning to speak, she looked at Amelia's face and stopped. The purring silence continued, lulling all lesser energies to sleep, until Amelia, pausing to adjust her thread, found her mood broken by actual stillness, and gazed about her like one awakened from dreams.

"There!" she said, recalling herself. "Ain't that a good smooth thread? I've sold lots of yarn. They ask for it in Sudleigh."

"'T is so!" confirmed aunt Ann cor-

dially. "An' you 've al'ays dyed it yourself, too!"

"Yes, a good blue; sometimes tea-color. There, now, you can't say you ain't heard a spinnin'-wheel once more!"

Amelia moved the wheel to the side of the room, and went gravely back to her chair. Her energy had fled, leaving her hushed and tremulous. But not for that did aunt Ann relinquish her quest for the betterment of the domestic world. Her tongue clicked the faster as Amelia's halted. She put away her work altogether, and sat, with wagging head and eloquent hands, still holding forth on the changes which might be wrought in the house: a bay window here, a sofa there, new chairs, tables, and furnishings. Amelia's mind swam in a sea of green rep, and she found herself looking up from time to time at her mellowed four walls to see if they sparkled in desirable yet somewhat terrifying gilt paper.

At four o'clock, when Amos swung into the yard with the oxen, she was remorsefully conscious of heaving a sigh of relief; and she bade him in to the cup of tea ready for him by the fire with a sympathetic sense that too little was made of Amos, and that perhaps only she, at that moment, understood his habitual frame of mind. He drank his tea in silence, the while aunt Ann, with much relish, consumed doughnuts and cheese, having spread a wide handkerchief in her lap to catch the crumbs. Amelia talked rapidly, always to her, thus averting a verbal avalanche from Amos, who never varied in his rôle of automaton. But she was not to succeed. At the very moment of parting, aunt Ann, enthroned in her chair, with a clogging stick under the rockers, called a halt just as the oxen gave their tremulous preparatory heave.

"Amos!" cried she. "I'll be whipped if you 've spoke one word to 'Melia this livelong day! If you ain't ashamed, I be! If you can't speak, I can!"

Amos paused, with his habitual resignation to circumstances, but Amelia sped

forward and clapped him cordially on the arm; with the other hand she dealt one of the oxen a futile blow.

"Huddup, Bright!" she called, with a swift, smiling look at Amos. Even in kindness she would not do him the wrong of an unnecessary word. "Good-by, aunt Ann! Come again!"

Amos turned half about, the goad over his shoulder. His dull-seeming eyes had opened to a gleam of human feeling, betraying how bright and keen they were. Some hidden spring had been touched, though only they would tell its story. Amelia thought it was gratitude. And then aunt Ann, nodding her farewells in assured contentment with herself and all the world, was drawn slowly out of the yard.

When Amelia went indoors and warmed her chilled hands at the fire, the silence seemed to her benignant. What was loneliness before had miraculously translated itself into peace. That worldly voice, strangely clothing her own longings with form and substance, had been stilled; only the clock, rich in the tranquillity of age, ticked on, and the cat stretched herself and curled up again. Amelia sat down in the waning light and took a last stitch in her work; she looked the coat over critically with an artistic satisfaction, and then hung it behind the door in its accustomed place, where it had remained undisturbed now for many months. She ate soberly and sparingly of her early supper, and then, leaving the lamp on a side-table, where it brought out great shadows in the room, she took a little cricket and sat down by the fire. There she had mused many an evening which seemed to her less dull than the general course of her former life, while her husband occupied the hearthsidge chair and told her stories of the war. He had a childlike clearness and simplicity of speech and a self-forgetful habit of reminiscence. The war was the war to him, not a theatre for boastful individual action; but Amelia remem-

bered now that he had seemed to hold heroic proportions in relation to that immortal past. One could hardly bring heroism into the potato-field and the cow-house; but after this lapse of time it began to dawn upon her that the man who had fought at Gettysburg and the man who marked out for her the narrow rut of an unchanging existence were one and the same. And as if the moment had come for an expected event, she heard again the jangling of bells without, and the old vivid color rushed into her cheeks, reddened before by the fire-shine. It was as though the other night had been a rehearsal, and as if now she knew what was coming. Yet she only clasped her hands more tightly about her knees and waited, the while her heart hurried its time. The knocker fell twice with a resonant clang. She did not move. It beat again the more insistently. Then the heavy outer door was pushed open, and Laurie Morse came in, looking exactly as she knew he would look: half angry, wholly excited, and dowered with the beauty of youth recalled. He took off his cap and stood before her.

"Why did n't you come?" he asked imperatively. "Why did n't you let me in?"

The old wave of irresponsible joy rose in her at his presence; yet it was now not so much a part of her real self as a delight in some influence which might prove foreign to her. She answered him, as she was always impelled to do, dramatically, as if he gave her the cue, calling for words which might be her sincere expression, and might not.

"If you wanted it enough, you could get in," she said perversely, with an alluring coquetry in her mien. "The door was unfastened."

"I did want to enough," he responded. A new light came into his eyes. He held out his hands toward her. "Get up off that cricket!" he commanded. "Come here!"

Amelia rose with a swift, feminine motion, but she stepped backward, one hand upon her heart. She thought its beating could be heard.

"It ain't Saturday," she whispered.

"No, it ain't. But I could n't wait. You knew I could n't. You knew I'd come to-night."

The added years had had their effect on him; possibly, too, there had been growing up in him the strength of a long patience. He was not an heroic type of man; but, noting the sudden wrinkles in his face and the firmness of his mouth, Amelia conceived a swift respect for him which she had never felt in the days of their youth.

"Am I goin' to stay," he asked sternly, "or shall I go home?"

As if in dramatic accord with his words, the bells jangled loudly at the gate. Should he go or stay?

"I suppose," said Amelia faintly, "you're goin' to stay."

Laurie laid down his cap and pulled off his coat. He looked about impatiently, and then, moving toward the nail by the door, he lifted the coat to place it over that other one hanging there. Amelia had watched him absently, thinking only, with a hungry anticipation, how much she had needed him; but as the garment touched her husband's, the real woman burst through the husk of her outer self and came to life with an intensity that was pain. She sprang forward.

"No! no!" she cried, the words ringing wildly in her own ears. "No! no! don't you hang it there! Don't you! don't you!" She swept him aside, and laid her hands upon the old patched garment on the nail. It was as if they blessed it, and as if they defended it also. Her eyes burned with the horror of witnessing some irrevocable deed.

Laurie stepped back in pure surprise. "No, of course not," said he. "I'll put it on a chair. Why, what's the

matter, Milly? I guess you're nervous. Come back to the fire. Here, sit down where you were, and let's talk."

The cat, roused by a commotion which was insulting to her egotism, jumped down from the cushion, stretched into a fine curve, and made a silhouette of herself in a corner of the hearth. Amelia, a little ashamed, and not very well understanding what it was all about, came back, with shaking limbs, and dropped upon the settle, striving now to remember the conventionalities of saner living. Laurie was a kind man. At this moment, he thought only of reassuring her. He drew forward the chair left vacant by the cat and beat up the cushion.

"There," said he, "I'll take this, and we'll talk."

Amelia recovered herself with a spring. She came up straight and tall, a concluded resolution in every muscle. She laid a hand upon his arm.

"Don't you sit there!" said she. "Don't you!"

"Why, Amelia!" he ejaculated, in a vain perplexity. "Why, Milly!"

She moved the chair back out of his grasp, and turned to him again.

"I understand it now," she went on rapidly. "I know just what I feel and think, and I thank my God it ain't too late. Don't you see I can't bear to have your clothes hang where his belong? Don't you see 't would kill me to have you sit in his chair? When I find puss there, it's a comfort. If 'twas you—I don't know but I might do you a mischief!" Her voice sank in awe of herself and her own capacity for passionate emotion.

Laurie Morse had much swift understanding of the human heart. His own nature partook of the feminine, and he shared its intuitions and its fears.

"I never should lay that up against you, Milly," he said kindly. "But we would n't have these things. You'd come to Saltash with me, and we'd furnish all new."

"Not have these things!" called Amelia, with a ringing note of dismay,—"not have these things he set by as he did his life! Why, what do you think I'm made of, after fifteen years? What did I think I was made of, even to guess I could? You don't know what women are like, Laurie Morse,—you don't know!"

She broke down in piteous weeping. Even then it seemed to her that it would be good to find herself comforted with warm human sympathy; but not a thought of its possibility remained in her mind. She saw the boundaries beyond which she must not pass. Though the desert were arid on this side, it was her desert, and there in her tent must she abide. She began speaking again between sobbing breaths:—

"I did have a dull life. I used up all my young days doin' the same things over and over, when I wanted somethin' different. It *was* dull; but if I could have it all over again, I'd work my fingers to the bone. I don't know how it would have been if you and I'd come together then, and had it all as we planned; but now I'm a different woman. I can't any more go back than you could turn Sudleigh River and coax it to run uphill. I don't know whether 't was meant my life should make me a different woman; but I *am* different, and such as I am, I'm his woman. Yes, till I die, till I'm laid in the ground 'longside of him!" Her voice had an assured ring of triumph, as if she were taking again an indissoluble marriage oath.

Laurie had grown very pale. There were forlorn hollows under his eyes; now he looked twice his age.

"I did n't suppose you kept a place for me," he said, with an unconscious dignity. "That would n't have been right, and him alive. And I did n't wait for dead men's shoes. But somehow I thought there was something between you and me that could n't be outlived."

Amelia looked at him with a frank

sweetness which transfigured her face into spiritual beauty.

"I thought so, too," she answered, with that simplicity ever attending our approximation to the truth. "I never once said it to myself; but all this year, 'way down in my heart, I knew you'd come back. And I wanted you to come. I guess I'd got it all planned out how we'd make up for what we'd lost, and build up a new life. But, so far as I go, I guess I did n't lose by what I've lived through. I guess I gained somethin' I'd sooner give up my life than even lose the memory of."

So absorbed was she in her own spiritual inheritance that she quite forgot his pain. She gazed past him with an unseeing look; and, striving to meet and recall it, he faced the vision of their divided lives. To-morrow Amelia would remember his loss and mourn over it with maternal pangs; to-night she was oblivious of all but her own. Great human experiences are costly things; they demand sacrifice not only of ourselves but of those who are near us. The room was intolerable to Laurie. He took his hat and coat and hurried out. Amelia heard the dragging door closed behind him. She realized, with the numbness born of supreme emotion, that he was putting on his coat outside in the cold; and she did not mind. The bells stirred, and went clanging away. Then she drew

a long breath, and bowed her head on her hands in an acquiescence that was like prayer.

It seemed a long time to Amelia before she awoke again to temporal things. She rose, smiling, to her feet, and looked about her as if her eyes caressed every corner of the homely room. She picked up puss in a round, comfortable ball and carried her back to the hearthside chair; there she stroked her until her touchy ladyship had settled down again to purring content. Then Amelia, still smiling, and with an absent look, as if her mind wandered through lovely possibilities of a sort which can never be undone, drew forth the spinning-wheel and fitted a roll to the spindle. She began stepping back and forth as if she moved to the measure of an unheard song, and the pleasant hum of her spinning broke delicately upon the ear. It seemed to waken all the room into new vibrations of life. The clock ticked with an assured peace, as if knowing it marked eternal hours. The flames waved softly upward without their former crackle and sheen; and the moving shadows were gentle and rhythmic ones come to keep the soul company. Amelia felt her thread lovingly.

"I guess I'll dye it blue," she said, with a tenderness great enough to compass inanimate things. "He always set by blue, did n't he, puss?"

*Alice Brown.*

